

Book review

Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, *Learning to make a difference: Value creation in social learning spaces*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-108-49716-9 (Hardback), AU\$156.95. ISBN 978-1-108-73953-5 (Paperback), AU\$52.95. ISBN 978-1-108-67743-1 (Online), USD\$26.00.

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Evaluating the learning that occurs in groups or organisations can often be challenging. People are the beating heart of every process or program we evaluate, as are our relationships and the shared learning which occurs because of these social interactions. What is the nature of these relationships? What learning occurs through them? What value does this learning have for participants, or organisations, and for society more broadly?

Some years ago, I took up the challenge to explore these questions in my PhD research on collaborative learning in higher music education. Serendipitously, I stumbled upon an evaluation framework which had a familiar name attached to it—Etienne Wenger, the “communities of practice guy”. The framework was designed to promote and assess value creation (or, as it was defined at that time, the learning that takes place) in communities and networks (Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011). It provided a detailed process for the collection and analysis of data, and the interpretation and presentation of findings about the learning experiences of my first-year university music cohort. It enabled me to identify the value of their participation in collaborative learning for music practice and performance (see Forbes, 2020; 2016). Findings took both narrative form (*value creation stories*) and visual form (presented as a *value creation matrix*). Not only was the framework a fundamental component of my research, it shaped the way I think about learning—from being something done *to us* to something done *in relationship with others*.

The value creation framework and the underlying social theory of learning have now been significantly revised, expanded, and given greater specificity in a new book, *Learning to make a difference: Value creation in social learning spaces* (2020) written by Etienne Wenger-Trayner with his work and life partner, Beverley Wenger-Trayner. This book is the first in a new series from the authors entitled *Learning to make a difference* (the next book will revisit the theory of communities of practice).

While I first became familiar with this work in an educational research context, the new book has much broader application. The authors explain that their work is theoretically grounded in experience and practice, and practically useful, describing themselves as “practitioner-theorists” (p. 2). The duo themselves work across the public and private sectors, NGOs, and international development, and their theoretically-informed framework will be useful for evaluators who have the freedom, flexibility, or ideological remit to not only evaluate a program’s outcomes, but “to evaluate learning how to make a difference to what people individually and collectively, care about” (p. 189). The authors clearly articulate that their audience for the book includes evaluators, but they deliberately cast a wider net, arguing that social learning is relevant across many seemingly disparate domains, including corporate management, politics, health, research, and NGOs. The book seeks to inspire these audiences to think about the ways in which social learning is relevant to their work. The new, updated

framework is a very useful and robust tool for evaluators to deploy in contexts where evaluation commissioners consider that people and their learning is of equal to, or perhaps of even greater importance, than a program's quantifiable outcomes.

The writing is carefully and consciously crafted to be easily digested by those in both operational and strategic roles. The Introduction helpfully provides a "choose your own adventure" road map through the book. The book lends itself to multiple levels of engagement—for practical, specific advice, or for a deeper dive into the theory underpinning the framework. It is thoughtfully structured to facilitate these different levels of engagement. If the theory sounds too heavy for you, read the "overview" at the start of each section for a neat summary, then skip ahead. Each section contains a suggested reading itinerary for selective readers.

The book is structured in two parts. Broadly speaking, Part 1 outlines the theoretical foundations for the framework, which is presented in Part II. Part I refines and extends Wenger's previous work, introducing and developing the concepts of *social learning spaces* (broader than the original *communities of practice*), *value creation* ("the details of how social learning contributes to the ability to make a difference") and *social learning modes* (generating and translating value and framing and evaluating social learning) (pp. 4-5). In this updated version of the theory, the focus is on people making a difference through mutual engagement, which is theorised as "value creation in social learning spaces" (p. 6). In other words, social relationships define the space and these relationships are central to making a difference to things that people care about. Importantly, the theory presented here does not define "value"—"this is something participants in social learning spaces have to decide" (p. 3); and this value is presumably something an evaluation would then articulate and translate for stakeholders. The book develops a "detailed, operationalized view of the nature of mutual engagement in social learning" (p. 5) and the value creation framework presented in Part II is the tool which evaluators can use to explore mutual engagement and the various social learning modes outlined in the theory of social learning spaces.

I have one word of encouragement for those who might be put off by the authors' seeming use of jargon. The authors use numerous everyday terms in quite technical ways, but they explain the meaning of these terms very clearly and simply. It may take a little time to become familiar with the theory, the terminology, and its application in an evaluation context, however, I believe the nuance and complexity which can be drawn out through its application is worth some initial time investment to understand both social learning theory and its operationalisation. I can see how the work of the authors could form its own stand-alone evaluation of social learning spaces or could be run in tandem alongside a more traditional evaluation framework.

The book is presented in such a way that the reader feels invited into a social learning space with the authors, which gives a great deal of agency to the reader. What an ingenious way to demonstrate the key concepts on offer in this book! This book is thoughtfully written in that the authors ensure that the reader engages with the ideas presented on the reader's own terms, in their own time, and to their level of interest. For qualitative researchers, the book provides an excellent worked example of reflexive writing.

Learning to make a difference: Value creation in social learning spaces contains a palpable sense of urgency—the authors argue that for the sake of the future of humanity, a learning

theory for the 21st century must be a *social* learning theory (p. 3). The authors contend that it is vitally important that we have both the tools and the theory to understand the value of learning to make a difference to things people care about within social learning spaces. The book's cover is a photo of waves lapping on the beach. It stands as a visual metaphor for a social learning space: a space with an incrementally increasing footprint, in which people expand their field of influence to make a difference to their world, but a space which naturally wraps around and across boundaries, resistance and change. Such spaces—and our ability to describe, understand, and value them—will be of increasing and critical importance as we confront the many complex challenges of our age.

References

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